

SOME CONTRIBUTIONS OF ECONOMIC THEORY
TO HOME ECONOMICS

BY
CLEO FITZSIMMONS

B. S., Iowa State College, 1928
M. S., University of Illinois, 1933

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN
ECONOMICS IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF
THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS, 1944

URBANA, ILLINOIS
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SOME CONTRIBUTIONS OF ECONOMIC THEORY TO HOME ECONOMICS

This thesis is concerned with an analysis of the nature of economic theory as a contributor to the field of home economics, or of home management, which is the area in home economics to which economics might be expected to make the greatest contribution. The analysis deals with the nature of home economics itself and with some aspects of its approximately 45-year development with which increased knowledge and application of economic theory might have been of assistance. Finally, it considers some contributions of economic theory to specific present day problems in home economics. One important task or obligation of workers in any field of subject matter which purports to borrow or to adapt material from another is that of keeping abreast of developments in the contributing field. For the great number of home economists who are interested primarily in application of theory to secure results that are identified as "better homes," "better family life," and "better individuals" the time required to become familiar with the body of theory itself may seem too great. However, it is scarcely possible to apply theory successfully with less than a thorough knowledge of it. Otherwise what might be regarded as failure of theory in application may actually be a demonstration of failure to understand the theory itself.

Economists have disagreed over the definition of economics, but somewhat less as to the actual subject matter with which they deal. Adam Smith in his *Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* limited wealth to those things that could be bought and sold, and so related most of his discussion to activities of the market. John Stuart Mill in his *Principles of Political Economy with Some of Their Applications to Social Philosophy* defined political

economy as a science dealing with "the nature of wealth and the laws of its production and distribution; including directly or remotely, the operation of all the causes by which the condition of mankind, or of any society of human beings in respect of this universal object of human desire is made prosperous or the reverse." While he considered that the essential problem was to increase the entire sum total of human happiness, he considered this happiness to include the greatest amount of material wealth, and still more of physical, spiritual, and moral welfare, associated with the least possible suffering. Alfred Marshall defined political economy or economics as "a study of mankind in the ordinary business of life; it examines that part of individual and social action which is most closely connected with the attainment and with the use of the material requisites of well being." However, in his writings it became rather more a study of wealth or the material requisites of well being, and their distribution and evaluation through the market, than of mankind and thus was more in agreement with the authors just mentioned, who had preceded him also in time, than appears from his definition.

Most economists today would agree with a more limited definition of economics than the ones given, such as that proposed by Lionel Robbins. Economics, in his words, is "the science which studies human behavior as a relationship between ends and scarce means which have alternative uses." This is found in fact to cover most of the material with which Marshall and other economic theorists really deal, and to delimit a field in which there is much to discuss.

Basic to economic theory is the concept of continuous expansion of human wants. The economist recognizes the desire for variety, and the influence of custom, habit, and of the fact of specialized production activities upon these wants. Economic theory is predicated upon an assumption

of scarcity of the means of production—land, labor, and capital—and examines the nature of this scarcity for each factor, relative to expanding wants and to the variety of uses in which all factors may be employed. Economics is concerned with the determination of value and the distribution of returns to factors of production through the mechanisms of the market. Economics discusses and describes what is done in the field it examines. As a science it explains how and why the observed results come to be. It is a positive science in that it describes what is or what tends to be in its field. It does not state what economic activity ought to be nor does it provide a description of desirable ends for it. However, it does describe what, under different known circumstances, the outcome of specific or contrasting forms of economic activity would be. This has continued to be the case with economic theory even though many economists and other critics have felt that the science should be concerned more directly with the general welfare. Economists as individuals may be interested in the attainment of such welfare, but the science, as it is developed, is not.

The deductive method is used for arriving at the laws of economics. Characteristically this involves four essential steps: preliminary observation and the making of assumptions; deduction on the basis of assumptions; testing of deductive laws by further observation and by reference to historical data; and finally, extension and revision of economic laws and generalizations as a result of testing. All of the steps are important and, for fields attempting to make use of such economic material, it should be recalled that economic laws as stated are meaningless without knowledge of the assumptions upon which they are based.

Of necessity economic laws are general in nature. Through their use predictions can be made of the results of economic behavior under given conditions and it is in

this respect that they offer aid to fields attempting to secure assistance from economics. However, economic laws have their limitations. They do not hold in conditions other than those described. The economist knows that change will take place but he cannot foresee its nature and predict in advance what the actual changed circumstances may be. This may often be disappointing when special assistance is desired in specific circumstances. But specific prediction of social change is not expected of a science, and none would be considered inadequate because it was lacking in this respect.

Home economists also have disagreed as to the definition of their field. From the first definition of home economics—"in its most comprehensive sense the study of the laws, conditions, principles, and ideals which are concerned on the one hand with man's immediate physical environment and on the other hand with his nature as a social being, and the study especially of the relations between these two factors"—it was changed to the somewhat more limited definition, "home economics is a distinctive subject of instruction including the economic, sanitary, and aesthetic aspects of food, clothing, and shelter as connected with their selection, preparation, and use by the family in the home or by other groups of people." The field thus changed from concern for the general welfare of man to concern with specific commodities that might contribute to that welfare. Later, home economics came to be regarded as a home centered education, with the goal of providing a more rational use of means in the attainment of ends felt to be desirable, such as "a more satisfying home life" and "more adequate individuals." Development of criteria for recognition of attainment of ends or goals logically would be the next important step that should be taken. Some home economists have regarded home economics as the science of ultimate consumption, but in its present development this is scarcely

an accurate description of it. Rather, it consists of the sciences of nutrition and foods which, as they are further developed, tend to overlap, and a science of textiles, together with various arts and skills as of food preparation, dietetics, institutional management, selection, care, and use of clothing and household fabrics, and a considerable body of other material as in health, applied art, and home management, none of which has as yet been incorporated into a recognized science.

By 1944 leaders in home economics had concluded that there was too great disagreement as to the scope of their field to formulate an acceptable definition of it. However, it was felt that home economics, as already noted, was "home centered" and "personalized" to meet the individual needs of the student. That is to say, it was regarded as the field of education in which information from all sources was selected and adapted directly to meeting the problems of the home and of the individual in everyday living. In colleges and universities, more and more emphasis had been placed upon the preparation of individuals to fill an increasing variety of professional openings aside from that of homemaking. Apparently it was not always appreciated that, in an important sense, the focusing of information upon the problems of the home and "personalizing" of home economics education is simply a method of teaching—relating the new to the familiar or the unknown to the known—by means of which ultimate goals may be attained and cannot be said to identify home economics subject matter exclusively.

There is an important contrast between economics and home economics which may affect the adaptation of material from the first by the second. While economics is a positive science, home economics—or that aspect of it which might seek aid from economics—is very largely normative. It is inclined to be concerned with what *ought to be* true in its

field, rather than with what actually is found to exist. The statements of criteria for choice of goods and of such goals as: optimum physical and mental health for family members; optimum development of individuals within the family; wholesome and useful relations of individuals and groups within and outside the home; and satisfying family life, are examples of the normative character of home economics material. A science of home economics, or of home management, is possible. Both inductive and deductive analyses would contribute to its development. It is this potential science which would derive the most assistance from economic theory.

Methods by which the sciences of nutrition, foods, and textiles have been developed are largely inductive. Home economists generally feel confident in the handling of any material that can be based upon chemical and biological analyses. Deductive methods are used in development of much of their material, but the results suffer because workers fail to follow through with a complete statement of steps taken in obtaining them. As the field expands, it becomes increasingly apparent that inductive methods are most adequate in the commodities stage of development. Home economists must also become familiar with and proficient in the use of methods of the social sciences in order to attain and recognize attainment in the ultimate goals which they themselves have chosen. Conscious and careful use of deductive methods would hasten the development of the science of home economics or home management. In it there would be greater emphasis than at present upon definition of concepts, statement of assumptions, formulation of laws and generalizations, and description of criteria.

A set of well-defined concepts is one of the most obvious contributions which any field of subject matter might make to another. It would be one of the possible contributions of economic theory to home economics. Home

economists are found to make use of terms employed in economics. But, as to the meaning of most of these concepts, home economists frequently do not agree with economics nor with each other. Nor do individual authors always define the terms employed with meanings varying from economic usage, and then use them consistently with the preferred meaning. Frequently when terms are used with other than the economic meaning there is no definition of them. Sometimes when definitions have been given, terms are used subsequently with meanings other than those defined. The result is that the adaptation of economic material by some writers in home economics seems little more significant than the mere use of words which represent definite concepts in the economic field but which, for the home economist, have neither the economic meaning nor any other that is definitely established. This cannot be due, as is sometimes suggested by home economists, to disagreement among economists. The latter group has been in substantial agreement with regard to many concepts commonly used in home economics since the time of Alfred Marshall, whose writings preceded any in home economics. Also, one might expect to find that, since home management texts appear infrequently, the most recent would be most closely in agreement with accepted concepts in economics and would adapt the successful interpretations of economic material offered by earlier works in home management. But this is not what has happened. In addition to the varied use of economic concepts, some of the most successful adaptations of economic material made by home economists have been ignored in texts that have appeared later, and the newer works suffer as a result.

While it is entirely possible that some variation from general economic usage would be desirable in the home economist's adaptation of economic concepts, analysis of the use of most concepts in the field indicates that they can be employed with little or no variation. Indeed, their

use as defined in economics would add to definiteness of thought and statement in home economics. Even where variation from the generally accepted economic meaning seems desirable, support for explanation of the variation can often be found in economic analysis.

Economic theory, since it deals with problems of the market and of price determination and of distribution of returns to the agents of production, might be expected to contribute directly to home economics which, among other things, is concerned with the consumers' problems in securing from the market, at prices they are able and willing to pay, the goods of appropriate qualities to meet their desires in consumption. However, some home economists feel that the questions with which economics deals are too general and too remote from their concern for knowledge of them to be helpful. They apparently believe that problems of the household and individual economy can be handled successfully with something less than the broad understanding needed to deal with problems of the entire society. In spite of this, social action is often the method adopted for aid in the solution of consumers' problems.

Already economists and home economists educated especially in the field of economics have presented analyses of market processes, of determination of prices of consumers' goods, and of methods of ascertaining the cost of household production—all from the consumers' point of view. Useful analyses of the concepts of consumption and production have appeared. In addition some work has been done on management of family resources with special reference to the use of economic principles. To some extent these can be regarded as contributions of economic theory to home economics.

Economic theory also contributes to home economics an example for the development of a science of home

management. Any social science provides the same example. But, because its methods have been subjected to frequent attack from one source or another from the time of the Classical writers to the present, many economists have studied and written about them, so that this material as well as the actual writings of economic theorists is available for study.

Finally, there are some significant problems in analysis of the economy of the household already being dealt with by home economists to which a more thorough understanding of economic theory would contribute aid in solution. These include:

Function of individual saving in the entire economy.

Principles involved in maximization of psychic income.

Clarification of the concepts of returns and costs to the household.

Function of the home.

Complicated results of social action programs.

Development of goals consistent with each other.

The list is made up of problems which seem to be dealt with inadequately in a number of the more important texts used in home management. As new problems of this kind appear there will appear also an increased opportunity for the use of economic analysis.

VITA

Cleo Fitzsimmons was born in St. Paul, Kansas, on March 5, 1900. Her parents are Edward Eldridge Fitzsimmons and Jennie (Parker) Fitzsimmons. Her elementary school education was secured in the school systems of Granger, Iowa, and Council Bluffs. Three years of her high school education were secured in Granger and the fourth at Perry, Iowa. Between the time of high school graduation in 1917 and entrance at Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa, for the spring semester in 1923, she worked in banks in Granger and Des Moines as general clerk and assistant cashier. She attended Drake University for one semester and returned to work in a Des Moines bank until September, 1924, when she entered Iowa State College, Ames, Iowa. From that institution she was graduated in March, 1928, with a B. S. degree in home economics with a journalism major. As an undergraduate she became a member of Phi Kappa Phi, Omicron Nu, Pi Gamma Mu, Theta Sigma Phi, Phi Upsilon Omicron, and Mortar Board and served one year as president of the local chapter of Theta Sigma Phi.

From April, 1928, to May, 1929, she was employed as a field worker for a Purnell project administered by Iowa State College, the purpose of which was the study of standards of living of Iowa farm families. From May, 1929, to January, 1931, she was employed by the Kane County Home Bureau and the Extension Service in Agriculture and Home Economics of the University of Illinois as Home Adviser in Kane County, Illinois. From January, 1931, to May, 1935, she was a member of the staff of the Extension Service at the University of Illinois with the title of Specialist in Junior Club Work. Between June, 1931, and August, 1933, she was enrolled as a graduate student at the University, and in August, 1933, was awarded a M. S. degree in economics with a minor in sociology.

From May, 1935, to September, 1942, she was employed as an Associate in Rural Youth Extension in the Department of Home Economics at Illinois. From September, 1942, to March, 1944, as an Associate in Home Economics she continued half-time work in the Extension Service and in addition taught home management and food economics classes in the Home Economics Department of the University of Illinois. From March, 1944, until September, 1944, she continued teaching in the Home Economics Department on half-time appointment only. Since September, 1944, she has been employed as an Associate in Home Economics, in the College of Agriculture and in the Agricultural Experiment Station, continuing with teaching and devoting half time to research in home management.

She was enrolled as a graduate student in home economics at the University of Chicago for a summer quarter in 1936. From June, 1940, to February, 1945, she did graduate work in the fields of economics and home economics at the University of Illinois. Part of this work was done on Sabbatical leave during the months of June 15 to August 15 in 1940, 1941, and 1942. Her publications include:

Training Leaders for Extension Groups in Child Guidance, The Journal of Home Economics, Vol. 23, No. 8, August, 1931, p. 749.

4-H Clubs Face Forward, The Journal of Home Economics, Vol. 25, No. 9, November, 1933, p. 776.

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